

CHAPTER 7

LIFE ON THE FARM

Our farm was located in the province of East Prussia, Germany, just south of the Lithuanian border, in a little village called Konradshof. It was a beautiful place surrounded in summer by green hills which changed to shimmering white after the first snowfall. My parents, brother Wini and I settled down in our new home, grateful for a place we could call our own.

We borrowed money from some Jewish people to buy machinery and animals. They trusted that we would repay—our word was our bond. Eventually, we had sixteen milk cows, four horses, lots of pigs, chickens, ducks and geese. The cows were kept in the pasture in the summer where there was plenty of grass to graze on; in the winter they had to be brought into the barn. They needed to be milked twice a day like clockwork. There were no milking machines, the job was all done by hand. With a hand-wagon and milk cans, we'd go to the pasture, bring the cows down from the hill and get ready for milking. Most of the time it fell to Mom and Oillie, our live-in farm help, to do this chore, although I had my share of it.

We had four beautiful mares, all thoroughbred Trakeners with the oak leaf branded on the side. There were new foals every year. I just loved the horses and the darling little colts. Taking care of them seemed more like pleasure than work. One year one of the mares had twins but one died at birth. The surviving colt was stunted and looked like a little dog. She was a beautiful beige color with a cream mane. Because of her petite size and adorable ways, we nicknamed her "*Angel*." She was allowed to roam wherever she pleased. When my Mom was milking in the barn, Angel would wait right there to get some milk. We taught this little foal all kinds of tricks: she'd walk into the kitchen and at our command lift her hoof, as if to shake hands. We were all sad when this lovable pet died of pneumonia at only three months of age.

Once, when I was riding on the wagon, the horses suddenly bolted. When one of the horses was spooked, the rest joined in and they'd run wild until they were played out. Woe to me, one time when the horses started to stampede, I rolled off and the wagon wheel ran over my left hand. It swelled up and was painful for a long time. Nevertheless, this didn't discourage me from working with the horses in the field and at home. My dream was to someday ride in a tournament, a dream that was never realized.

As the colts grew up, I would have to break them in. This was a chore my Dad did not particularly like. But to me, it was an exciting adventure. Riding on the back of one of those untamed, high-spirited horses, galloping and jumping over ditches, with the wind blowing through my hair was the height of my day. There was always the challenge between you and the horse and the risk involved until the animal was subdued and became obedient to your commands. Luschi was my favorite--a brown mare with black mane. When I called her, she came running, snorting in answer to my command. My father

would let us ride the horses whenever there was time and they weren't too tired after a day working in the fields. In winter, we hitched one of the horses to pull a string of small sleds. The ringing of the bells attached to the horse and the laughter of us kids falling off the sled and racing to get back on, or being pulled with skis tied behind, was so much fun. When all the skis were confiscated by Hitler's army, my Dad started to make skis for all the kids in the village.

With the many animals on the farm, each of us had our own pet projects. Wini raised lots of rabbits—at one time he had over forty. They were allowed to run freely all over the place. He was so attached to them he wouldn't let anyone butcher them. I had pigeons-- beautiful pigeons with red-brown feathers and big red eyes. They were my pride and joy. I too did not let anyone butcher them .

When we moved to Konradshof I was given a puppy that I named “**Morchen**”. He protected all of us. As we worked in the fields, he'd lay next to sleeping baby Wini. Then he'd come running to my mom and bark for her to let her know Wini was awake. One time as I went to a neighbor's house, their big dog was loose and attacked me; he bit me in the side and tore down my dress. I screamed “Morchen” real loud and he came running and fought off that big dog so I could run home.

Every year we had little piglets. The little pigs were allowed to run around the barn. There was a tiny opening in the mother pig's pen where the young ones found a way to escape. We couldn't figure out one year why two of the piglets were growing so much faster than the rest. Then one day we decided to watch and, sure enough, the two fat little piglets squeezed through the opening into the cow barn. One of the cows, when she heard

them coming making squealing noises, would lay down on her side and let the little pigs suck her milk. A good thing not all of them took advantage of that poor cow!

Winter was an enjoyable time, no work in the fields, lots of time to play in the snow. The family would ride in a fancy sled to church on Sundays and to visit relatives. There were times, at least once a year, when my father made a sharp turn that caused us to tumble out of the sled. When that happened, we'd all fall out and with Dad joining in, we'd sit in the snow and laugh until our sides ached. Gliding along in the sled, watching the falling snow glittering like crystal in the sun was the most awesome, beautiful sight.

Once a year the entire village would join in a sled ride. We bundled up in heavy jackets, warm caps and mittens and covered up with a fur blanket. The sound of the many bells was like music in the air. Afterwards, a whole bunch of us rode about twenty km to a Gasthouse (Restaurant) where we enjoyed coffee and Streusselkuchen (Coffee cake).

The people in the village were good people. They helped each other whenever needed. A retarded son of our schoolteacher, fascinated by the firemen practicing, took two-year old Wini by the hand and led him into our barn where he lit matches and started a fire. The barn burned to the ground and the two of them barely escaped with their lives. My Dad was able to get the horses out. My Mom covered her face with a wet rag and rescued the pigs. I also became a firefighter, helping with pumping water by hand from the pond. My father said over and over, "*I lost everything.*" But afterwards all the men in the village came and helped us rebuild the barn. I was on the roof helping to pound in nails. We had our own woods so it didn't cost so much having boards cut from our trees. We had to report the fire to the state. The 18-year-old retarded boy was taken away. Three months later we heard he was dead. We believed he was killed by the state. We

heard that anyone institutionalized in a state facility didn't last long. Retarded or abnormal persons were not considered human beings—they weren't allowed to marry and have children. The policy was that they be castrated. For the first time it gave us thought about what was happening in Germany. One day someone from the state came to take Otilie, our helper and friend of the family, to be sterilized. They claimed she was not a normal person, which was not so. She had come from Russia as a young girl and could not read or write. We questioned, "*Was that a crime?*" My mother was so angry, she told the authorities that Otilie was as normal as they were and refused to let her go. She also told them in no uncertain terms that she would be responsible for Otilie and they better never darken her door again. My mother was a brave soul, she could have been put in jail for saying all that.

Near our little village was a large hill which was a training center for gliders for the air force. We watched the men practicing many times and also were invited to take rides. But I was never brave enough to try it.

There was a pond next to our neighbor's place. In the summer, I took the horses there for a swim after the day's work. It was such a nice feeling, being safe on the horse's back and leading him wherever I wished to go.

In the winter, we ice skated on the pond. The winters were quite long, from September until April, so in our leisure time we did a lot of skating. We practiced all kinds of fancy figures, all the while daydreaming that we were waltzing with some handsome fellow, but in reality it was only one of the village boys. Ah, sweet youth!

A short distance outside our village was a beautiful large lake where we went swimming after work all summer long. My Dad taught me how to swim. It was so

peaceful on the lake; birds nested on the other side, water lilies grew on both sides.

Swimming in that water rejuvenated us after a day's work. We and our friends had many enjoyable times there.

In the fall, when the geese and ducks were butchered, we had a "feather" party. The feathers were used to make quilts and pillows. The larger feathers were split and the hard spines removed. The women of the village came together dressed like mummies: long-sleeved dresses with scarves tied tightly around their heads. Otherwise, it was almost impossible to get the down and feathers out of their hair. We sat around and gossiped for hours while we worked. When we were finished, coffee and cake was served. That ended a day in which we accomplished a lot that was worthwhile and enjoyable. All in all, life on the farm was tranquil and happy.



Edith 1936-37
Taking one of the horses for a swim



Edith 1938



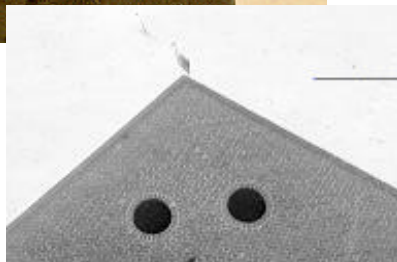
Edith milking a cow
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My family 1935



Glider in Konradshof



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